
The Jesuits in Latin America: Legacy and Current Emphases

Jeffrey Klaiber, S.J.

The murder of six Jesuits in El Salvador in 1989 dramatically reminded the world that the Jesuits are still in Latin America and, as usual, in the center of the storm. For more than 400 years the Jesuits have been present in the region as educators and missionaries. Their colonial legacy is well known. Less well known is what they have been doing since they returned in the nineteenth century after their expulsion in 1767.

Early Service in Latin America, 1549–1767

The Jesuits were founded in 1540. Only nine short years later they sent their first missionaries to Latin America, to Brazil. In fact, they arrived on the ship carrying the first governor-general, Tomé de Souza. As such, the Jesuits were founders of Portugal's most important New World colony. Manoel da Nóbrega and José de Anchieta, two of the first Jesuits, evangelized the Indians, founded mission towns (one of which was São Paulo), and defended the Indians from the white colonists. But they also founded schools and parishes for the colonists. By the eighteenth century the Society of Jesus was the most important educational and missionary order in Brazil.

The Jesuits arrived in Mexico and Peru in 1568. By coincidence, they arrived on the ship bearing Peru's most important viceroy, Francisco de Toledo. But these were more than coincidences: de Souza in Brazil and Toledo in Peru looked upon the Jesuits as key advisers and collaborators in establishing their respective empires in the New World. As a newly founded order, untainted by the abuses that had affected older orders in the Catholic Church and fired with the enthusiasm of fresh troops, the Jesuits built schools and founded missions everywhere, from Mexico to Chile, from Brazil to Paraguay.

By the late eighteenth century the Jesuits were clearly the most influential order in Latin America. Their schools flourished, and their missions prospered. The Paraguay missions in particular were already being romanticized in Europe as a sort of New World utopia. A little over 100,000 Guaraní Indians in Paraguay and another 100,000 Indians in Bolivia (the Chiquitos and the Mojos) lived in neatly organized towns, with their own Indian

militia. Scarcity and hunger were unknown. Peru's leading Marxist, José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930), observed in admiration that these Indian societies were the only places where the Indians were actually better off after the conquest. In the rest of Latin America the Indians were exploited in the mines or forced to perform menial services for the colonists.

Contemporary critics of the Jesuits accuse them of paternalism in their treatment of the Indians. That may be so, but it was certainly a bland paternalism, because the Indians were allowed to bear arms and to make their own decisions affecting the daily life of each mission.

In 1750 Spain and Portugal made a treaty by which seven missions were transferred to Portuguese territory. That incident was the background of the 1986 award-winning movie *The Mission*. The Jesuits told the Indians that they, the *padres*, had to leave, but the Indians were free to accompany them or to remain. The Indians chose to remain and to fight. For two years (1754–56) Jesuit-trained Indian armies held off two European armies, the Portuguese and the Spanish. (The Spanish king felt obliged to join the war in order to keep his word to the Portuguese king.)

Less defensible was the Jesuits' use of black slaves to run their sugar estates and other properties, which the Jesuits acquired in order to finance their schools. Contemporary historians debate whether or not the Jesuits were modern capitalists. They were certainly efficient, and their haciendas prospered. They were not really modern capitalists, however, for they did not aim to expand their wealth beyond what they strictly needed to support the schools. Also, not all Jesuits accepted slavery. In fact, they were repeatedly warned by the general in Rome to end the practice. But the New World Jesuits, like people with vested interests everywhere, claimed that they could not run their haciendas without slaves. At least the slaves were baptized, taught Christianity, and decently fed. Also, the Jesuits encouraged the slaves to marry, which was a way to guarantee stability.

Suppression

When everything seemed to be going well, the axe fell. In 1767 the Spanish king Charles III ordered all the Jesuits out of Spain and Latin America. In fact, the king of Portugal had already expelled the Jesuits (559 altogether) from Brazil in 1759. Most of the 2,171 exiled Jesuits ended up in the Papal States, and only a handful lived to return to their homelands in the next generation. The

Jeffrey Klaiber, S.J., Professor of History at the Pontifical Catholic University, Lima, Peru, has lived and worked in Peru since 1976. His previous books include *studies of religion and politics in Peru and Latin America*. Currently he is working on a history of the Jesuits in Latin America.

expulsion can be understood in the context of royal absolutism and the perception that the Jesuits, staunch defenders of the papacy, were outside royal control. All their schools, missions, and lands were expropriated. The schools and missions were turned over to the bishops and other religious orders, and the haciendas were auctioned off.

In 1773 Pope Clement XIV suppressed the entire Society of Jesus. He did so under pressure from the Catholic kings of Europe. As a result of the suppression all the exiled Latin American Jesuits were now former Jesuits. Those who were priests joined the local diocesan clergy. Those who were not yet priests had to find a means to support themselves, which some did by

The Jesuits established *colegios* and universities, which were recognized as among the best.

teaching or writing. But these exiled former Jesuits were quite active. In fact, they made a major contribution to the history and literature of their homelands.

Three in particular wrote histories of their countries that influenced local Creoles (the whites born in the New World who would eventually lead the independence movement) in search of a national identity. Francisco Javier Clavijero, one of the exiled Mexican Jesuits, wrote a history of the Aztecs and other Indian cultures. Although Clavijero acknowledged that the Aztecs were quite bloody, he also recognized the value of their great temples and other cultural achievements. Juan Ignacio Molina, a Chilean Jesuit, wrote a history of Chile that exalted the courage of the Araucanians (today called Mapuches), who never surrendered to the Spanish. And Juan de Velasco, an Ecuadorian, wrote a history of the Indian peoples of Ecuador.

Another of the exiled Jesuits became famous because he openly called for Latin Americans to break with Spain. Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán wrote an open letter to the Creoles in 1792 in which he denounced the Spanish king as a despot. His letter, the Latin American equivalent of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, influenced many of the independence leaders. Viscardo died in London in 1798, but not before he had turned all his papers over to Rufus King, the American ambassador in England. Inspired by Viscardo's ideas, King tried unsuccessfully to persuade the American government to join the movement to liberate Latin America.

Return to Latin America, from 1816

The Society of Jesus was finally restored as a religious order in 1814. But because the Jesuits were so few, they had to build up strength before sending out missionaries to the rest of the world. They trickled back to Latin America, with one group arriving in Buenos Aires in 1836; another went to Colombia in 1844. Only in Mexico were there Mexican Jesuits who had survived the long period of exile. In 1816 three aged Jesuits refounded the Mexican province, which by 1820 had 37 members.

Unlike during colonial times, the Jesuits this time did not arrive with viceroys or governors. Quite the contrary, in all of Latin America they were looked upon with suspicion and hostility by liberal governments, which viewed them as harbingers of

papal interference and conservative reaction. There was some justification for this attitude because the Jesuits, having been exiled and suppressed, were much more cautious and less open to new ideas than their colonial predecessors had been. In fact, in nearly every Latin American country, the Jesuits were soon exiled for a second time. The Jesuits who arrived in Argentina in 1836 were exiled by the dictator Juan Manuel Rosas in 1843, and the group that went to Colombia was exiled in 1850. Indeed, the Jesuits in Colombia who went back in 1858 were exiled for a third time in 1861.

On the positive side, these exiled Jesuits reestablished the Society of Jesus in other parts of Latin America. Overall, the Jesuits managed to weather liberal persecution, and by the end of the nineteenth century they were once again working in all Latin America. In fact, they were thriving. In Mexico in 1900 there were 244 Jesuits, most of whom were native born. The mission to Colombia began in 1844 with 12 priests and 6 brothers. In 1924 the Colombian province had 306 members, the vast majority native born.

Everywhere the Jesuits founded *colegios* (in Latin America *colegio* refers broadly to primary and secondary education) and universities, which were soon recognized as among the best. They also went back to their old missions in the jungles or the desert of northern Mexico among the Tarahumara. After the encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) of Pope Leo XIII, the Jesuits also began preaching the new social message of the church. Although the Jesuits still maintained their militant antiliberal mentality, they now had a more positive message to preach: social justice.

Liberal anti-Catholicism reached its zenith in Mexico during the Calles regime (1924–28). Bernardo Bergöend, a Belgian Jesuit who went to Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century, founded the organization Catholic Action for Mexican Youth (1913). Many of the leaders of that movement became the leaders of the Cristero (from their cry *¡Viva Cristo Rey!* "Long live Christ the King!") rebellion against the Calles regime. One Mexican Jesuit, Miguel Pro (1891–1927), was captured and ordered shot for his connections with the Cristeros. Two of Pro's brothers were actively involved in the movement. But in fact Miguel Pro, though sympathetic to the movement, did not approve of its violent means. Even before his death Pro became a legend

Arrupe urged all Jesuits in Latin America to make the call for social justice the heart of their ministries.

because of his humor and antics. He would go around Mexico City to celebrate Mass or hear confessions in many different disguises, sometimes as a worker and other times as a dandy. Pro is currently a candidate for canonization.

A near-contemporary of Pro was Father Alberto Hurtado (1901–52) in Chile, who is also being considered for canonization. Hurtado was very much concerned about the lack of a Christian response to the poverty in Chile. As a young priest in 1937, recently returned from studies in Europe, he gave talks and wrote books urging Catholics to become more social-minded. In 1944 he founded the Hogar de Cristo (Home of Christ) as a refuge for abandoned children. Since then the Hogar de Cristo has become the largest private charity in Chile for abandoned chil-

dren, the homeless, and the poor in need of health care and housing. The Hogar receives most of its support from Chileans. Hurtado, an incredibly energetic man, also founded a center to train Christian labor leaders and, in 1951, the magazine *Mensaje* (Message), which is one of the principal forums for Christian humanism in Latin America. Hurtado died the next year of cancer. Thousands of Chileans of all social classes accompanied his remains to their final resting place at the Hogar de Cristo. A man ahead of his times, in 1941 he wrote a book that became famous, the very title of which brought criticism from conservatives: *Is Chile a Catholic Country?* In it he analyzes the weakness of Catholicism in Chile and praises Protestants for their self-denial and sincerity.

Vatican II, Reform, and Revolution

Major changes took place in the Society of Jesus as a result of Vatican II and the dynamic leadership of Pedro Arrupe, who was general between 1965 and 1981. In fact, the changes had long been in the making. The general before Arrupe, Jean Baptiste Janssens, a Belgian, exhorted all the provinces, but especially those in Latin America, to face the social question and prepare to take action. Janssens, and later Arrupe, fostered the creation of centers of research and social action, known by their initials in Spanish as CIAS. Also, many young Jesuits were sent to study social science in Europe or the United States. In every province of Latin America the Jesuits set up these centers, which in turn organized "surveys" (the English word was used) to study the social situation of each country and propose reforms.

In 1968 Arrupe attended a meeting in Rio de Janeiro with all the provincials and superiors of Latin America. There he urged all Jesuits in Latin America to make the call for social justice the heart of their different ministries, whether they were university professors, parish priests, or retreat directors. Everywhere the new social consciousness was incorporated into formation programs for young Jesuits. At the same time, major changes were sweeping over Latin America. The Cuban Revolution was followed by a series of military dictatorships in the 1960s that aimed to stop the changes. By way of exception, in Bolivia under General René Barrientos (1964–69) and in Peru under General Juan Velasco (1968–75), the military pushed for reforms. Latin American society became highly polarized as the debate increasingly came down to the question: reform or revolution?

This polarization placed the Jesuits in the center of the debate. For the political right wing and the military, the Jesuits with their new message of social justice were perceived as allies of the revolutionaries. In fact, several times Arrupe wrote letters to Jesuits worldwide, but with a special eye toward Latin America, warning them of the pitfalls of Marxist analysis, and he exhorted them not to favor violence. While most Jesuits eschewed Marxist interpretations, they recognized the importance of using the social sciences (which included a knowledge of Marxism) in order to study the causes of poverty and propose reforms.

This social polarization, plus the changes in the church, produced internal crises. Many Jesuits began to question the appropriateness of maintaining their schools for the middle and upper classes. In Mexico in 1971 the Jesuit provincial decided to close the Instituto Patria, the principal Jesuit secondary school in the capital. This decision not only provoked the anger of many parents but also divided the Mexican Jesuits. Similar debates were held throughout Latin America. Most provinces opted for maintaining their elitist schools, but only after introducing courses and activities that would make the students more socially con-

scious. Today, in a typical Jesuit school in Latin America, upper-division students are encouraged to do voluntary work among the poor on the weekends or during the summer.

The Jesuits could not avoid the political crises that erupted all over the continent. Many Spanish Jesuits were forced to leave Cuba after the Bay of Pigs invasion (1961), in which some of their former students participated, and Belén High School in Havana

With their new message of social justice, the Jesuits were perceived as allies of the revolutionaries.

(from which Fidel Castro graduated) was confiscated by the government. In Chile, Roger Vekemans, the Belgian Jesuit who helped found the Bellarmine Center (the CIAS center of Chile), left the country when Salvador Allende was elected in 1970. Vekemans and his team were very close to the Christian Democrats, and accusations had been made that the U.S. CIA had funneled money via Vekemans into the Christian Democrats' campaign against Allende. The accusations were unfounded, but the stigma of being associated with the CIA was too great to bear. In the following years Vekemans became an adviser to Alfonso López Trujillo, the archbishop of Medellín, Colombia, who spearheaded the conservative reaction against liberation theology. During the same period a Chilean Jesuit, Gonzalo Arroyo, was instrumental in founding the group Christians for Socialism, which supported Allende. Arroyo and many other priests fled the country after Augusto Pinochet took over in 1973.

The Central American Jesuits were particularly hard hit. Most of Central America forms one province, and many of the Jesuits came from the Basque regions of northern Spain. In the 1960s the Society of Jesus founded three different universities: one in Guatemala City, another in Managua (Nicaragua), and the third in San Salvador (El Salvador). Under Ignacio Ellacuría, accompanied by other Jesuits and lay professors, the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) of San Salvador became a lively center of new ideas for change. Right-wing animosity increased as the Jesuits became involved in grassroots movements. In 1977 Rutilio Grande, a young Salvadorian Jesuit, was killed in reprisal for his work among peasants in an area north of the capital city. The White Warrior Union, a paramilitary death squad, ordered all Jesuits out of the country. During the civil war in that country (1980–92), which began with the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and, later that year, four American religious women, Ellacuría became one of the principal voices in favor of reconciliation based on dialogue and reform. Right-wing politicians and military considered that position tantamount to treason. Top military leaders ordered Ellacuría and several companions to be murdered in November 1989 while leftist forces were attacking the city.

Nicaragua posed a peculiar problem. There the leftist forces, the Sandinistas, came to power in 1979, and several Jesuits and other priests were directly involved. Fernando Cardenal was the most prominent Jesuit (poet Ernesto Cardenal, his cousin, is not a Jesuit) in the Sandinista government. He organized a literacy campaign and served as minister of education. In 1984 the general, Father Kolvenbach, requested Cardenal to leave the Jesuits because the pope had expressly forbidden priests to hold

political office. But the same general allowed Cardenal, who made his first vows for the second time in 1997, back into the society.

The same story was repeated with variations in the rest of Latin America. The dictator of Paraguay, Alfredo Stroessner (1954–89), had several Jesuits deported as a result of their social commitment to peasants and Indians. In 1981 the government of Honduras denied permission to Jesuits and priests of Maryknoll to enter the country. The accusation was always the same: the priests were involved in “politics” and not performing their

There is a Jesuit high school in every major city in Latin America.

religious functions.

The period of dictatorships and internal wars ended in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the Jesuits ceased to be at the center of the storm. But they continue to be very active and influential in all Latin America. The Society of Jesus experienced a vocation crisis in the years following Vatican II but gradually climbed back, eventually reaching the same high numbers as before the crisis. In 1973 there were 3,801 Jesuits in Latin America, of whom roughly half were Latin Americans by birth. But in 2001 that number had dropped to 3,474. Given the vocation crisis in Europe and North America, very few new missionaries now go to Latin America. On a positive note, however, the proportion of native Latin Americans has grown steadily. In Mexico, Colombia, and Chile the vast majority of Jesuits are native born. In countries with a large Indian population (the Andean countries or Guatemala), it has proved difficult to draw many native vocations because of the high academic standards of the society. But even in those cases, the novitiates and formation programs call for more flexibility to allow for the great differences in cultural backgrounds.

The Jesuits are still an educational force. There are nineteen universities and graduate faculties run by the Jesuits, some big and others very new and small. One of the most prestigious is the Ibero-American University in Mexico (of which Vicente Fox is a graduate). One of the biggest is the University of the Sinus River (UNISINOS) in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, with close to 30,000 students. There is a Jesuit high school in every major city in Latin America. Belén High School, closed by the Cuban government, was refounded in Miami, where it is flourishing today.

Current Jesuit Emphases

The Jesuits have long since gone beyond their traditional universities and high schools. In 1955 José María Vélaz, a Venezuelan Jesuit who was born in Chile, founded the first Fe y Alegría (Faith and Joy) school among the poor in Caracas. Basically, Fe y

Alegría schools are state schools run by the Jesuits. The Jesuits make up the national administrative team, while the individual schools are run by different religious orders of women or committed lay Christians. The state pays most of the salaries of the teachers. Since its humble beginnings in Venezuela, Fe y Alegría has grown until it now operates 1,675 centers, with over 437,000 students in 15 countries. In Bolivia alone 6.4 percent of all primary and secondary students are in Fe y Alegría schools.

The Jesuits also run many nongovernmental organizations that seek to foster community development and citizen participation or to defend human rights. When the Mexican Jesuits announced their decision to close the Instituto Patria in 1971, they founded in its place a new entity, Cultural and Educational Development, which consists of a team of Jesuits and lay associates who live with poor and indigenous communities with the aim of empowering them to bring about their own development. In Bolivia the Center of Research for the Promotion of the Peasantry (CIPCA, formed in 1971) offers workshops and publishes materials to help the peasants organize themselves. In La Paz the Jesuits also created the Center of Multi-Educational Services (CEMSE), which aims to help children in state schools get a better education. State schools in Bolivia are so poor that most of them do not even have a library. CEMSE has a library and computers, and it encourages children from state schools in La Paz to use the library. CEMSE also offers free health services and training courses for state teachers, and it produces educational programs for use nationwide.

Human rights have also become a major Jesuit concern. In Mexico City the Miguel Agustín Pro Human Rights Center, founded in 1988, offers legal assistance to victims of human rights violations (and many of those are victims of the government itself, as was the case during the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas in 1994). Other centers attempt to face the problem of poverty in creative ways. In 1977 Rosalynn Carter visited Father John Halligan's Center for the Working Boy, in Quito. Halligan, a New York Province Jesuit, founded his center in 1964 to take care of abandoned children. In time, and with the help of generous contributions, the center has become a model in Latin America. The center takes in poor families (not just boys) to educate the entire family—mother, father, and children—so that with new skills they can acquire decent jobs. More than 5,000 families have gone through the center's training program.

Contemporary Jesuits in Latin America are very influenced by the principle of multiplying, for relatively few Jesuits actually work in their schools, universities, and research or human rights centers. Rather, the Jesuits normally take a more advisory role, preferring to encourage committed laypeople to assume leadership positions. Jesuits look back on their colonial churches and missions with pride but have no intention of reproducing them today. If anything, they aim to capture the creative spirit of the old Jesuits, but in the context of the challenges of the twenty-first century. The colonial Jesuits defended the Indians and taught them how to defend themselves. That ideal, now extended to all marginalized groups, is still very much alive today.

Note

1. I am now in the middle of writing a book tentatively titled *Los Jesuitas en America Latina* (The Jesuits in Latin America). This article draws on that research. Further information can be found in Nicholas Cushner, “Jesuits,” *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* (New

York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1996), 3:316–19, and John W. Padberg, S.J., “Jesuits,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3:20–24.



William Carey Library

MISSION RESOURCES

www.WCLBooks.com



Crisis and Hope In Latin America

A Christian Perspective

Emilio Nunez and William Taylor

Panoramic yet thorough. Part one examines the historical, socio-political, and religious background of Latin America. Part two probes issues, such as post-conciliar Roman Catholicism, liberation theology, the charismatic movements, contextualization, and social responsibility. Part three explores the implications for the church, mission agencies, and expatriate missionaries serving in Latin America.

WCL766-4 William Carey Library, 1996 Paperback, 544 pages
List: \$17.99 Our Price: \$14.39 3 or more: \$13.49*

The Cross and the Sword

The Rebellion & Revolution in Chiapas, Mexico

Carl Lawrence, with Benjamin Rule

"Spanish conquerors, Marxist priests... fearless American women missionaries... and a cast of thousands of displaced evangelical believers in Chiapas, Mexico, swirl together in a blaze of history, theology, and first-hand reporting... Truth is stranger than fiction, and never more tragically so than in *The Cross and the Sword*. Read it to be informed, read it and be challenged....read it and drop to your knees in prayer..." -Terry Madison, President/CEO of Open Doors with Brother Andrew, USA

SP1-7 Shannon Publishers, 1999 Paperback, 255 pages
List: \$12.00 Our Price: \$10.00 3 or more: \$8.50*

Señorita Aimee

Marguerite McQuilkin Cartee

This book aptly and vividly describes Aimee McQuilkin's participation in the beginnings of the Association of Evangelical Churches of the Caribbean's church ministry in Colombia. It will tell you about the ten long years of violence and persecution. It goes on to report the special touch of the Holy Spirit on the young congregations. You will learn of Aimee's backwoods evangelical witness in remote places. Your heart will be blessed and your resolve to serve Christ more faithfully will be reinforced as you read of Aimee's forty years of service in Colombia.

LAM130-9 Latin American Mission, 2002 Paperback, 173 pp.
List: \$7.95 Our Price: \$5.97 3 or more: \$5.56*

Understanding Latin Americans

With Special Reference to

Religious Values and Movements

Eugene A. Nida

"University students in North America will enjoy this brief, readable tour of the high points of contrast between their ways and those of Latin America. Moreover, this is solid knowledge. . . ." -Richard Millet Professor of History, So. Ill. State Univ. "Few North Americans have a grasp of the invisible realities of Latin American culture the way Eugene Nida does, and fewer still can capture it all on paper with such skill. This is an essential text for anyone headed that direction."

-Marvin Mayers, Professor of Anthropology, Wheaton College

WCL117-8P William Carey Library 2003/1974
Paperback, 172 pages

List: \$16.99 Our Price: \$11.05 3 or more: \$ 9.35*



William Carey Library

Secure Online Ordering at
www.WCLBooks.com

Call Toll-Free at
1-800-MISSION

Please use code
"IBM01" when ordering.

GABRIEL@WCLBooks.com

Gabriel Resources / WCL
PO Box 1047
Waynesboro, GA 30830

Outside the US:
(706) 554-1594
Fax: (706) 554-7444

*3 or more of the same title. Prices do not include shipping. Prices are subject to change without notice.